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ABSTRACT

In his autobiography, Malcolm X wrote that he did not become fully literate until he went to prison in the 1940s. Literacy profoundly changed Malcolm's life--his progression from street talker, to spokesman for the Nation of Islam, to independent spokesman for human rights, is related to changes in his consciousness brought on by literacy. When he lived on the streets of New York, hustling for a living, Malcolm relied on oral communication. One scholar argues that part of the resistance to white racism and domination was the creation by Blacks of a fast-paced, improvisational language that contrasted sharply with the passive stereotyping of the tongue-tied "sambo." Malcolm never lost his "street talker" skills, but literacy was central to his later development. In prison, he became frustrated with his inability to read or write well, and he began to take advantage of the prison library. As Malcolm read and discovered the enormous injustices done to Blacks, and the attempts made to explain those injustices away, the level of dissonance he experienced became unbearable. The writings and teachings of Elijah Muhammad served to satisfy Malcolm's literate need for closure. He became a convert to Muhammad's version of Islam, a decision that had monumental consequences for his thought and lifestyle. What happened, essentially, is that Malcolm's experience with literacy opened his mind in many respects, but also closed it by leading him to devalue his earlier life. For teachers, the lesson is that the mind controlled by writing technology has limitations, as does the mind without exposure to writing. (Contains 16 references.) (NKA)

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Orality, Literacy, and Malcolm X

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Orality, Literacy, and Malcolm X

In a recent essay (1992), Village Voice columnist Joe Wood wrote that the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, when asked what he thought of Malcolm X, replied "All he did was talk." For Mr. Wood, "The Justice meant this observation as a complaint, but I see it as Malcolm's most appealing characteristic. He stands for Black talk about Black thinking; we use him as a starting point." (p. 15). Nearly thirty years after his death, Malcolm's talk has been found appealing to human beings of all backgrounds. For me, Malcolm's most appealing talk was that which moved away from the racial separatism of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam and instead embraced a more inclusive struggle against economic and cultural imperialism. Walter Ong (1982) has argued that "writing restructures consciousness." (78-115). Is this true in the case of Malcolm X?

As recounted in his Autobiography, Malcolm X did not become fully literate until he went to prison in the 1940s. Learning to read and write created profound changes in his life, as it perhaps does for all human beings. The purpose of this paper is to show that Malcolm's progression from street talker, to spokesman for the Nation of Islam, to independent spokesman for human rights, is related to changes in his consciousness brought on by literacy. Near the end of his life, Malcolm was moving toward a kind of balance between an "oral" and a "literate" consciousness--an openness to experience and the ability to distance himself from it. By looking at Malcolm X in this manner, it can be shown that his

life is a symbol not just of Black Rage and resistance to imperialism, but of the struggle that every human being goes through in trying to arrive at a sense of the self that is part of and yet distinct from humanity as a whole. Let's explore these ideas.

Malcolm X as Street Talker: The Oral Roots

There are no "primary oral" communities in the United States. That is, communities in which writing is not even known. However, communities such as the African-American in an urban setting retain a high degree of orality (Smith, 1972; Smitherman, 1977, Ong, 1981). Smith traced the oral heritage to Africa:

> Black Americans are essentially an oral people much like their African ancestors, who found the expressive word to be the basis of society. In African society the alkali or elder who kept the history and traditions in his head was among the most revered of the community. In black American communities the alkali could be any one of several persons, from the preacher to the street corner player of the dozens. What is important in this context is that orality has been preserved. (Smith, 1972, 10).

As a young student in Mason, Michigan, Malcolm X did learn to read and write. In fact, he claims in his autobiography that "English and history were the subjects I liked most." (1965, 29). Presumably, these were subjects that one could argue about, something not possible with math: "I'm sorry to say that the subject I most disliked was mathematics. I have thought about it. I think the reason was that mathematics leaves no room for argument. If you made a mistake, that was all there was to it."

(29).

It wasn't until he found himself on the streets of New York City, hustling for a living, that Malcolm had to rely on the oral form of communication. Most critics have identified this stage of Malcolm's life as his "lost" period before Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam transformed his spiritual and political consciousness. Yet in a recent study, Kelley (1992) argues that this period was central to Malcolm's political development:

> . . . whether or not Malcolm acknowledged the political importance of that era on his own thinking . . . his participation in the underground subculture of black working-class youth during the war was not a detour on the road to political consciousnes but rather an essential element of his radicalization. (157).

For Kelley, everything about Malcolm's life as a "hep cat" made a statement about the class, racial, and cultural tensions existing in the America of the 1940s. In essence, the "hep cats" or "hipsters" were engaging in a kind of resistance to white racism and domination. Part of the resistance was the creation of a language unique to the hip subculture: "Young black males created a fast-paced, improvisational language that sharply contrasted with the passive stereotyping of the tongue-tied sambo, and in a world where whites commonly addressed them as 'boy,' zoot suiters made a fetish of calling each other 'man.'" (Kelley, 160).

Key here is that Malcolm's life as a "hipster" reflected a <u>mode of action</u> in response to unjust conditions that he never really repudiated <u>in fact</u>. Part of that mode of action was a "street language" that not only created an identification with the

real people engaged in survival behaviors, but also informed Malcolm's way of thinking. In other words, the street language was not a mere "ornament" used as persuasion technique. Instead, the language gave voice to those without one. As Asante (1991) puts it: "Culturally, Malcolm tapped the most creative aspect of African-American life, drawing upon the proverbs, the folklore, the nuances, the syntax, and the grammar of the people's creation to make his own discourse . . . when he spoke he took the words right out of our mouths." (7-D).

While it is true that Malcolm never lost his "street talker" skills, what he chose to <u>talk about</u> underwent massive changes when he joined the Nation of Islam in the late 1940s. From that time until leaving the group in 1964, Malcolm's comments were essentially mirrors of Elijah Muhammad's themes of the natural devilishness of whites, racial separatism, knowledge of self, knowledge of the enemy, and knowledge of culture. Though Malcolm never formally repudiated the Nation of Islam platform, and in fact upheld many of its tenets (especially on the need to reclaim Africa for blacks), his final year of life displays someone who was increasingly dissatisfied with what he had spent many years defending. As he told Gordan Parks, " . . . I was hypnotized, pointed in a certain direction and told to march. Well, I guess a man's entitled to make a fool of himself if he's ready to pay the cost. It cost me twelve years." (<u>Autobiography</u>, 429).

No doubt Malcolm's initial enchantment and later fall out with The Nation had much to do with his spiritual and political development. These explanations exist elsewhere (e.g. Hooks, 1990; Benson, 1974, 1987; Rich & Smith, 1969; Wolfenstein, 1981). Here,

the focus will be on the relationship of literacy to Malcolm's development.

Malcolm as NOI Spokesman: Restructured Consciousness

In the autobiography, Malcolm describes his fascination with "Bimbi," a man he knew in prison who was very well read and had a command of the English language. Frustrated at his own inabilities to read or write very well, Malcolm began to take advantage of the prison library. At one point he went as far as to write out an entire dictionary in longhand. Describing the liberating experience of becoming literate, he says:

> I suppose it was inevitable that as my word-base broadened, I could for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying. Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment that I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk . . . up to then, I had never been so truly free in my life. (172-173).

As is often the case with people who experience literacy in this manner, they want to talk even more. Such was the case with Malcolm. From that point on he missed few opportunities to debate or speak in public.

But the potential effects of literacy are not that simple. Ong (1982) writes that "By separating the knower from the known, writing makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the objective external world quite distinct from itself but also to the interior

self against whom the objective world is set." (105). Writing and reading, as activities typically done in isolation, contribute to a kind of reflection much different from that of oral cultures. In an oral culture, there is more dependence on the collective for developing one's personal identity and understanding of the world. Absent the option of "looking things up" in a library or somewhere else, I must rely on those around me. With writing, I can begin to distance myself from the collective, and as a literature develops I can reflect on it and "interpret" it in my own way independent of the group.

With writing comes the need to "explain" reality in a "logical" manner. Havelock (1963) showed that Plato, under the influence of a writing based consciousness, could not tolerate the level of acceptance of the Homeric "myths" of his day. Plato's world of "ideas" was another way giving "order" to the chaotic world. The Homeric poems created order by telling the Athenians "the way it is." The Platonic dialogue encouraged a "search" for the meaning of what is. Socrates, as the man of wisdom, was for Plato not merely telling another "myth." Rather, he had debunked the myths and laid a foundation for living the good life.

Elijah Muhammad was in a sense the Socrates to Malcolm X. As Malcolm X began to read and discover the enormous injustices done to the black man, and the attempts made to explain those injustices away, the level of dissonance he experienced became unbearable. On the scene comes Mr. Muhammad to satisfy the literate need to have closure, to explain:

> The teachings of Mr. Muhammed stressed how history had been "whitened"--when white men had written history

> books, the black man had simply been left out. Mr. Muhammad couldn't have said anything that would have struck me much harder . . . This is one reason why Mr. Muhammad's teachings spread so swiftly all over the United States, among all Negroes . . . the teachings ring true--to every Negro. (Autobiography, 174).

Like Socrates did for Plato, Mr. Muhammed exploded the myths of the contemporary culture. Reflecting the literate mind that "disowns" its oral past, Malcolm seems unable to realize that Muhammad really had not taught him anything that he didn't already know from the street. In effect, Muhammad provided a language that satisfied Malcolm's literate need for explanation and control.

But Malcolm was not content merely to accept Mr. Muhammad's clarifications of the external world. Instead, he became a convert to Muhammad's version of Islam, a decision that had monumental consequences for his thought and lifestyle. According to Louis Lomax:

> From that moment (Malcolm's conversion), Malcolm has neither smoked, cursed, drunk, nor run after women. He is the most puritanical man I have ever met. I have interviewed him scores of times, but he will not meet me for an interview in any place liquor is sold. (quoted in Rich & Smith, 1969, 168).

And as regards Malcolm's own interpretation of his relationship to Muhammad:

> Mr. Muhammad is everything and I am nothing. When you hear Charlie McCarthy speak, you listen and marvel at what he says. What you forget is that Charlie is nothing

> but a dummy--he is a hunk of wood sitting on Edgar Bergen's lap . . . This is the way it is with the Messenger and me. It is my mouth working, but the voice is always his. (Rich & Smith, 169).

Thus Malcolm was required to speak the truth as Muhammad saw it, complete with tales of white devilishness being the result of a mistaken experiment by a black scientist, "Mr. Yacub." Mr. Yacub had accidently grafted the color out of a class of beings and in the process took out their humanity. This became the white race whose time on Earth was about up, as shown by the emergence of the Nation of Islam.

McLuhan (1962) argued that the literates are more prone to indoctrination and propaganda than orals, if only because the literates are exposed to it regularly. Literates are especially prone to developing personality cults, because the personality in question gives some sense to the chaos that we feel in our lives. This is why Malcolm could later say he had wasted twelve years in the Nation: he had allowed himself to forsake the true gift that comes with literacy. Namely, the ability to discover the wide range of choices that exist and create new ones. One could argue that making choices is the most human of human actions. Towards the end of his tenure in the NOI, Maclolm came to the realization that he had allowed himself to limit the range of choices available to him in interpreting the past, living the present, and planning for the future. That realization enabled him to go "back to the streets" not to preach Muhammad's final answers to the questions confronting Africans; for, as much as Muhammad's message may be liberating when it debunks racist myth, like any other ideology it

encourages closed mindedness when it becomes dogma. What was needed for Malcolm was to somehow join the capacity for analyzing situations that he had developed with literacy, with the "collectivist" value system and quest for practical action that was the heritage of his days as an oral "hipster."

Post NOI Malcolm: The Quest For Open/Closure

Malcolm X made trips to Africa and the Middle East between April and November of 1964. The trips were important in his development of a post-NOI program for change. His struggle was essentially one of trying to find a way to remain open to human contact while constantly trying to understand those things that close humans off to each other. After returning from the last rip to Mecca, he said:

> Because of the spiritual rebirth which I was blessed to undergo as a result of my pilgrimage to Mecca, I no longer subscribe to sweeping indictments of one race . . . I am not a racist and do not subscribe to any of the tenets of racism. In all honesty and sincerity it can be stated that I wish nothing but freedom, justice, and equality--life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness--for all people. My first concern is with the group of people to which I belong, the Afro-Americans, for we, more than any other people, are deprived of these inalienable rights. (quoted in Wolfenstein, 1981, 310).

To attribute Malcolm's shifts in consciousness only to his somehow arriving at a better understanding of Islam is to minimize some of the not so obvious influences on consciousness. Specifically,

Malcolm's experience in Mecca was probably closer to his experience as a "hipster" than it was to his experience as the spokesman for a hierarchical organization. In Mecca, and in all of his travels in the third world, he found people actively participating in struggles for survival against economic exploitation and other ills. He began to realize, perhaps not at the conscious level, that the role of the intellectual in society--and he certainly was one, was to use one's knowledge to help work <u>with</u> those struggles. To do that requires being open to all human beings, not to condemn them for not believing as we do.

The struggle to remain open to experience after learning a technology (writing) that encourages closure, and our failure to understand the distinction, is one of the tragedies of our times. Take a look at academic culture in America--the most literate part of the population. How many scholars actually see their role as one of producing connections with society as a whole? How many of us willfully sell our knowledge to those elements that work against true community? How many of us, in fact, have an active resentment against that part of the population that doesn't have our "skills?" More than we care to admit, I imagine.

The problem goes beyond mere "elitism." Malcolm X was being "elitist" when he adopted a NOI philosophy that forced him to adopt a rhetoric that ultimately forced him not only to devalue the experience of those who had not converted, but to devalue <u>his own</u> pre-NOI experiences. Yes, the oral "hipster" was in need of change, but it did not follow that <u>everything</u> the hipster does is contrary to human community and development. What had happened, essentially, is that Malcolm's experience with literacy opened his

mind in many respects, but also closed it. This is the paradox of literacy, and Maclolm's experience is probably not significantly different than most people whose thought is "massaged" by a technology.

This paper is not claiming that Malcolm's becoming more literate "caused" his various changes in outlook and strategy. But the changes are related, and if this is true then it should have strong implications for the way writing is taught. Specifically, we ought to be teaching that the mind controlled by writing technology has limitations, as does the mind without writing. In the case of Malcolm X we see the main limitation of literacy, what Walter Ong (1977) refers to "programed closed-system thinking":

> Closure can be protected and desirable at times, and it is particularly necessary at earlier stages of thought to rule out distractions and achieve control. But programed closed-system thinking, whether in matters of science, history, philosophy, art, politics, or religious faith is ultimately defensive and, although defenses may be always to some degree necessary, to make defensiveness on principle one's dominant mood and program is to opt not for life but for death. (340).

Paradoxically, Malcolm's move to openness may have contributed to his death, as a combination of closed-system thinkers in the government and the NOI may have sensed his new openness as too much of a threat.

Asante (1991) says that Malcolm's talk "elevated the people's street language to a national style." (7-D). This was especially true in his final days, when the commitment to openness made him

realize that there is truth to be found in the streets, not just in the abstract theorizing of literate scholars and prophets. Perhaps if we could recognize the limitations of literacy, there would be many more Malcolm X's in our presence.

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